

## Plan to provide early education is strong, fiscally responsible

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At the very moment you are reading this article, there are kindergarteners in your neighborhood elementary school who feel bad about themselves.

These children, all deserving of the same access and opportunity, are struggling to catch up in basic language, counting and social skills because they did not get the chance to gain these skills in preschool.

Many of these kids think it's their fault — that they are just not smart.

Their parents, faced with the choice of paying bills or paying preschool tuition, blame themselves.

And we're sure that their teachers feel bad because they lack the time to help these far-behind kids while still moving the rest of the class to get ready for first grade this fall.

And thus begins the achievement gap — the separation between the haves and have-nots that is so unfair. Our children deserve better than this, and so do their parents and their teachers.

The good news is that Hawaii is poised to join the ranks of 39 other states that have created state-supported preschool programs.

Thanks to strong leadership by Gov. Neil Abercrombie, state legislators and a broad coalition of community leaders — along with the voices of parents and their children — Hawaii has crafted a strong, fiscally responsible plan to offer high-quality preschool to the keiki who need it most.

This comes in the nick of time, since the state's Junior Kindergarten program will end next year.

For decades, Hawaii's patchwork quilt of early learning programs has been built on the backs of hardworking parents, with a bit of help from the federal government and support from philanthropies — none more so than Kamehameha Schools.

Once Hawaii has created its state-funded system, parents will still pay what they can in this public-private partnership. The federal government has just announced a plan to give funds to those states that have an existing preschool program.

Philanthropy will still do its part as well, continuing to take risks on funding innovative advances that best serve our keiki and families.

No doubt several foundations and trusts will build the capacity of preschools to serve more kids, help train teachers and ensure that faith-based programs can continue.

We all want the best for each child so they can be healthy, happy and compete well in the new global economy. But prioritizing our keiki requires deepening the partnership among public, private and social sectors.

For these efforts to succeed, all of the pillars must be strong, and able to collaborate with one another.

When we put our children first, the entire state benefits — from the individual child, families, and our communities to the significant positive returns we'll see economically and socially.

Now is the time for the state to step up and do its part and invest in a high-quality early learning program so that no kindergar- tener, parent, or teacher will ever blame themselves.

We need to give every child in every neighborhood the chance to enter kindergarten ready to thrive.

### Early education needs more public funding

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